

By CHARLES BABINGTON

Associated Press

CORAL SPRINGS, Fla. — If there's any place where tea partiers in Congress might hesitate to call for cuts in Social Security and Medicare to shrink the federal debt, Florida's retirement havens should top the list.

Even here, however, Republican lawmakers are racing toward a spending showdown with Democrats exhibiting little nervousness about deep cuts, including those that eventually would hit benefit programs long left alone by politicians.

In fact, many GOP freshmen seem bolder than ever. It's Democrats, especially in the Senate, who are trying to figure out how to handle the popular but costly retirement programs. Congress, meanwhile, is rapidly nearing critical decisions on the budget and the nation's debt ceiling.

In southeast Florida last week, first-term GOP Rep. Allen West, a tea party favorite, called for changes that some might consider radical: abolish the Internal Revenue Service and federal income tax; retain tax cuts for billionaires so they won't shut down their charities; stop extending unemployment benefits that "reward bad behavior" by discouraging people from seeking new jobs.

As for entitlements, West told a friendly town hall gathering in Coral Springs, if Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid "are left on autopilot, if we don't institute some type of reform, they'll subsume our entire GDP" by 2040 or 2050. GDP, or gross domestic product, measures the value of all goods and services produced in the United States.

Social Security, the largest federal program, mainly benefits retirees. Medicare provides health coverage for older people. Medicaid helps those with low incomes. Combined, the three consume about 40 percent of the budget. Their costs are growing rapidly. Social Security and Medicare benefits now exceed the payroll taxes that fund them.

West, who's likely to draw serious Democratic opposition next year, showed scant interest in edging toward the center on anything. He didn't take issue with the man who said congressional Democrats "have joined with the radical Islamists," or with the woman who said President Barack Obama "certainly doesn't support Israel."

In Greenville, S.C., a different Republican freshman with tea party ties, Rep. Trey Gowdy, also suggested during last week's congressional break a paring back of social programs.

According to a Greenville News account posted on his website, Gowdy "described a recent school classroom where most children indicated they think it's the government's job to provide health care, Social Security and education. 'We've got to do something about the sense of entitlement,' Gowdy said."

Gowdy's office later said he thinks Social Security "is a key aspect of a broad effort to fundamentally reform our entitlement system, but any solution must honor our commitment to current retirees."

Indeed, West and many other Republicans say current and soon-to-be retirees should see no benefit cuts. Their calls for changing Medicare and Social Security often lack specifics, and it's unclear whether the divided Congress will tackle the programs' long-term problems or postpone action, as has happened many times before on Capitol Hill.

West's desire to slash spending seems to stop at his district's doorstep. The Coral Springs audience cheered loudly when he said he helped secure a \$21 million grant for a new runway at the nearby Fort Lauderdale airport.

"Grant money is not pork," West said. He issued a press release saying the runway project "will generate at least 11,000 jobs" by 2014 and cost \$791 million.

While West spoke in Coral Springs, several dozen Republicans had wine and hors d'oeuvres in Palm Beach as they awaited a speech by former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani. There was ample sympathy in the room for raising the eligibility age for Social Security benefits.

Obama's debt commission recommended gradually increasing the full retirement age, from 67 to 69, over the next 65 years.

"No one is going to be hurt by it," said Steve Stevens, 80, a retired real estate developer. If people, rich or poor, count on Social Security to fund their retirement, he said, "it's very poor planning."

Cynthia Steele, 51, said anyone making more than \$100,000 a year should not receive Social Security benefits, even if it affected her and her friends.

In Washington, Democrats are conflicted. Thirty-two Senate Democrats joined 32 Republicans in urging Obama to negotiate a broad-based spending plan that includes changes to Social Security and Medicare.

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., says he opposes cuts in Social Security benefits.

The centrist Democratic group Third Way says the public is ready to embrace gradual changes to entitlement programs and that Republicans are winning the issue so far.

"We don't believe Republicans 'going too far' will be their Waterloo," the group said in a memo. "The party seen as most serious on the issue will win the day."

If Republicans and Democrats cannot agree soon on spending plans for this year and next, the government could face its first partial shutdown since 1996. That prospect worries leaders of both parties, and they are watching to see if last week's recess hardened or softened lawmakers' positions.

West suggested there is room for compromise, but not much.

"I'm not for shutting down the government," he told the Coral Springs crowd. But he said Obama must lead the budget negotiations, or else.

If there is a shutdown, West said, "it's going to be because the president is not engaged."